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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [EAID](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01: CIVIL SOCIETY PREPARES FOR RELEASE OF
ELECTORAL LAW

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman. Reason: Sections 1.4 (b)
) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) As the national commission charged with drafting a new electoral law has been conducting its work, civil society activists have been developing an eight-point platform for promoting electoral reform. All eight points, including proportional representation and an independent electoral commission, reportedly reflect what is already in the draft law. A consortium of civil society organizations will meet after the draft's public release to develop a public education program for electoral reform. (The text of the draft law was submitted by the commission to Prime Minister Siniora on June 1.) The Lebanese Association for Democratic Elections (LADE) has already begun lobbying Parliamentarians -- who will decide the ultimate fate of the draft law -- with mixed results so far. LADE's new head warned us that Parliament must come to a decision on the electoral law by June 2007, at the latest, in order for reforms to be implemented before the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2009. He said that the international community, and the United States in particular, should use its considerable influence in Lebanon to support electoral reform. End summary.

BOUTROS TO PRESENT DRAFT LAW TO SINIORA

¶2. (C) On May 31, emboffs met separately with Walid Fakherddine, newly-elected secretary general of LADE, and Oussama Safa, director of the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS), to discuss civil society efforts to promote the forthcoming draft electoral law. Both confirmed that the chairman of the electoral reform commission, senior statesman Fouad Boutros, would present the draft to the government on June 1. (Note: It was delivered to the prime minister today, as expected.) Safa added that, according to electoral reform commission member Paul Salem, copies of the draft law in Arabic, English, and French will be available to the public in the next few days.

CIVIL SOCIETY PREPARATIONS

¶3. (SBU) Fakherddine told Embassy staff that LADE has established a coalition of civil society NGOs, including LCPS

and the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA), dedicated to supporting the electoral reform effort. This coalition has agreed to an eight-point platform in support of: 1) a proportional electoral system; 2) absentee voting; 3) an independent commission to oversee the elections; 4) lowering the voting age to 18 and the candidacy age to 22; 5) a quota for women's representation; 6) regulations on the use of mass media; 7) regulations on campaign finance; and 8) voting access for the disabled.

¶4. (C) Fakherddine told us that they plan to launch a grassroots and outreach campaign in the coming year to promote the above-mentioned reform goals. Fakherddine said that all eight goals are reflected in the draft law. "With three LADE members on the electoral commission, including two former secretaries-general" (Paul Salem and Ziad Baroud), Fakherddine said, "we made sure these issues would make it into the law."

¶5. (SBU) Oussama Safa, later that day, said that this summer's public awareness campaign would make a special effort to reach university students and returning expatriates. He specifically mentioned setting up booths and advertisements in Beirut's Rafiq Hariri International Airport to publicize electoral reform. Winning the support and interest of expatriate Lebanese, he explained, would be an important way to reach local political leaders, so many of whom depend on the support of Lebanese expatriates across the Middle East, North America, and Europe.

¶6. (SBU) Fakherddine told emboffs that the civil society coalition will meet again next week, after the public release of the draft law, to review the text in detail and draft a unified curriculum for public education campaigns.

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Fakherddine said that LADE has already been involved in this effort for some months. He showed Embassy staff sophisticated booklets that LADE has published for distribution to Lebanese citizens and political leaders.

POLITICIANS NOT KEEN ON REFORM ...

¶7. (C) Fakherddine said that, in meeting with over 75 parliamentarians during the past few months to build support for electoral reform, most displayed very little interest in electoral reform, "They either told us that we would need 20 years to achieve electoral reform, or that now is not a good time." If the MPs displayed any interest at all, he said, it was only in how they could gerrymander districts to ensure more seats for their own parties or blocs. Fakherddine said that Prime Minister Siniora is virtually alone among the political elite in his dedication to genuine electoral reform.

¶8. (C) This lack of political support is dangerous, Fakherddine said, because Parliament has only one year to pass a comprehensive new electoral law in order for it to be fully in effect when parliamentary elections next take place in 2009. This is because many of the most important items in the draft law, including the independent electoral commission, expatriate voting, and campaign finance and media regulations, will take two years to develop and implement. "So, if we want to have this law ready for the 2009 elections, Parliament has to pass the law by June 2007 at the latest. Issues such as absentee voting and an independent commission will require several months of administrative and logistical preparation," he said.

¶9. (C) Fakherddine warned that Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri will try to delay the discussion of the draft law once the Siniora cabinet endorses it and submits it to Parliament. "If, by June 2007," he said, "the Parliament does not endorse the electoral law, it will be impossible to implement reform. If Parliament postpones discussion until 2008, the

debate will be limited to electoral districting." Fakherddine also added that reform of the Constitutional Court, the media law, and the law on political parties would be essential measures as well.

...BUT TIME IS ON OUR SIDE...

¶10. (C) LCPS's Oussama Safa likewise told us that politicians will not be initially supportive of the law. He mentioned Saad Hariri's Future Movement and Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party as two particularly hard sells. The timing of the draft law's release, however, will actually work to its advantage. This is because, after Commission Chairman Fouad Boutros presents the draft to Siniora, the cabinet will have one month to review it. After that, they must present it to Parliament. Since Parliament will be in recess for most of July and August, civil society groups can use this time to build public support for electoral reform with a coordinated media campaign plus roundtable discussions at the local and national level.

...AND THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY CAN HELP

¶11. (C) Finally, Fakherddine said that the international community, and the United States in particular, should use its considerable influence in Lebanon to support Lebanon's electoral reform process. Doing so would also help the U.S. image in Lebanon, by showing that the United States is interested in more than just economic reform. Fakherddine described a widespread perception in Lebanon that the United States is interested primarily in reform in order to advance its own economic aims. Sustained U.S. pressure, both public and private, for genuine electoral reform will provide Lebanese reformers with much-needed momentum.

¶12. (C) At the same time, however, without specifically mentioning ongoing U.S. electoral assistance programs, Fakherddine cautioned that direct U.S. intervention could be counterproductive, especially in the Shi'a community and those parts of Lebanon where it is concentrated. "Personally, I don't have anything against it," Fakherddine

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explained, but he suggested that any U.S. assistance efforts be exceptionally discreet. "The less visibility in these areas at the grassroots level, the better," he said.
FELTMAN